Student Consultation Panel

CONSULTATION ON OU Students Association Governance Reforms

25 August to 8 September 2021

The complete record of the discussion, and the summary, can be viewed on the forum.

Response to Consultation

1. Introduction and Background

In late 2019, the Students Association commissioned an external review of our organisational culture. This was undertaken by Pecan Partnership and the review reported to our Central Executive Committee (C E C) and Board of Trustees in early 2020. All of the recommendations which emerged were accepted by both bodies and implementation agreed.

One of the recommendations emerging from that external review of our culture was for the Students Association to commission a follow up external review of our governance, something that was agreed to be long overdue.

In late summer 2020, we ran a competitive tendering exercise to appoint an external consultancy with experience in charity and membership organisation governance to perform this external review of our governance. Almond Tree Strategic Consulting were successfully appointed to undertake this work, to a brief agreed by our Trustees who have responsibility for our governance. The review was undertaken over late 2020 and into early 2021.

The review reported back to our C E C and Board of Trustees in April and May 2021 and a significant report was produced by the consultants.

The recommendations took a comprehensive view of both the overall make-up of our student leadership structure, including issues such as scrutiny and accountability, together with how the wider student body could be engaged with our governance through events such as an Annual General Meeting (A G M). In August 2021, we published the report in full on our website here.

The recommendations were accepted by our Board of Trustees. A draft implementation plan was then produced by a working group of Trustees, C E C members and staff. This was considered and approved in full by the Board of Trustees for putting into delivery at their meeting in July 2021.

The first stage of implementation was to undertake consultation work over August and September to dig deeper into the detail that would support any implementation of the recommended changes. This was focused on 'how' the recommended changes could best be implemented.

2. Consultation Activities

We ran a wide-ranging consultation exercise between 23 August and 11 September 2021, which delved deeper into the potential implementation of the recommendations. This included:

- A consultation via the University's Student Consultation Panel which ran from 25 August to 8 September, open to the representative panel of c.200 students which supports the University's consultative process. 9 students took part in the forum discussion. The complete record of the discussion, and the summary, can be viewed on the forum.

- A survey, open to all students, which ran from 23 August to 13 September. Participation was incentivised with a prize draw. 195 current students and 19 other stakeholders took part in the survey. The survey results can be viewed here.

- A series of online focus groups which ran from 6 to 11 September. Each session was geared to a different type or demographic of the student body and sessions ran in daytime, evening and weekend slots to try and be available to as many students as possible. 23 students and volunteers took part in the focus groups. The focus group results can be viewed here.

- An open email inbox, where students who couldn't or didn't want to engage with any of the above could provide their feedback directly.

3. Consultation Outcomes

The working group (comprising Trustees, C E C members and staff) produced a paper of proposals which built on the consultation findings and the recommendations of the governance review report. The proposals paper can be viewed here.

This paper was considered by C E C members at their meeting on 9 October 2021 and their feedback was shared with our Board of Trustees who made final decisions on the proposals at their meeting on 12 October 2021. The proposals were accepted in full, with minor additions based on the C E C's feedback. At the 12 October meeting the Board of Trustees also agreed to call a Conference in January 2022 for Students Association members to vote on whether the proposed changes should go ahead.

A summary of how the Student Consultation Panel contributions were incorporated into the proposals is included on the following pages.

You said	Response
1. Student Leadership Committee Summary: The feedback raised points such as the time investment required of students who were committee members: • One contributor suggested that it would be useful to take into consideration the workload of different posts and the time commitment required of the committee members, and that having role descriptions would clarify these points during elections. • One contributor saw specific portfolios such as Student Support, Student Community, E D I, and Education as important and would prefer such a portfolio-based approach over a skills-based approach.	Across the range consultation activities, opinion was divided on the question of portfolio-based or skills-based, with a slight preference for portfolio based roles, but with a recognition that there are key skills that would be useful or desirable to have within the leadership team. The proposal developed was for the new Student Leadership Team structure to comprise 8 roles: • President (paid) • Deputy President (paid) • Academic Representation Officer • Finance and Administration Officer • Community Officer • Engagement Officer • Student Support Officer • E D I Officer (Sections 3.2 to 3.11 of the proposals paper) There would also be an appointed Student Member of the University's Council who would join the Student Leadership Team in a non-voting capacity. The challenge of workloads for elected student leaders was recognised within the Governance Review and also within the consultation responses. The Student Leadership Team would be assisted by the Student Forum and this may include Officer roles potentially having volunteer 'teams' around them (formed of members of the Student Forum) to support them with their workload. (Section 3.10 of the proposals paper) If the proposed changes to the Student Leadership Team structure are approved by members at Conference, a working group will then be convened to develop portfolio content, remits and hours requirements for the roles, along with Terms of Reference for the Student Leadership Team and the Student Forum.

You said	Response
2. Student Representation Forum Summary: The feedback in response to the composition of the Student Representation Forum included different suggestions, such as having places reserved both on the basis of different student groups (such as those studying in the same faculty, living in the same Nation, or sharing a group characteristic such as students with a disability or those who are single parents) and on the basis of different student needs. The feedback around how Forum members could gather student views highlighted the need to reach students using a wide variety of channels/platforms. • One contributor suggested Forum seats to be reserved to accommodate a good mix of Forum members, and another supported reserving places that enabled better representation of students with protected characteristics. • The different ways in which student views could be gathered included suggestions around surveys, polls, focus groups, newsletter, social media, notifications on StudentHome, and V L E forums.	One of the things that became clear during the consultation activities was that the proposed name of the Forum, by including the word 'Representation', was potentially causing some misunderstanding and a possible conflation between this cohort of students (who will form part of the Association's internal governance structure) and our cohort of student voice representatives (who work within the University's academic governance structure). To avoid confusion, the proposals recommend that the forum name be simply 'Student Forum'. Common feedback across the consultation activities referred to places on the forum to represent nations, faculties, students with protected characteristics or shared circumstances. The proposal is for the Student Forum to comprise c.30-40 members, a mixture of elected an appointed, made up as follows: • A student representative from every O U School • A Post-Graduate Research (P G R) student • Nations representatives (4 UK nations and international) • Faculty representative for each of the 4 O U Faculties plus Open & Access • A representative from each of our Student Groups (D S G, Pride and B A M E) • A floating number of remaining places, to enable flexibility to ensure that we can be agile to cover under-represented groups and hear from key student demographics (e.g. 'ethnicity, age, gender, disability, full time workers, undergraduate and postgraduate taught study, carers, etc.). Some of these may be utilised to support emerging priorities/needs as very short-term roles to support individual projects or a task and finish group for example to help make the roles more accessible for a wider number of students. (Sections 3.12 to 3.18 of the proposals paper) If the introduction of the Student Forum is approved by members at conference, the suggestions provided in the consultation for gathering student views will be considered as part of the development of the Forum's Terms of Reference and ways of working.

You said	Response
3. Scrutiny Panel Summary: The feedback on how the Student Leadership Committee's (S L C) work could be scrutinised raised the importance of ensuring that the student community is aware of Committee meetings, papers and minutes. The feedback on how the S L C's work could be communicated to the wider student body highlighted the need to increase the visibility of the S L C and its work amongst O U students. - One contributor suggested the recording and/or live broadcasting of S L C meetings, but another disagreed with making these meetings public. - Other suggestions mentioned practices that are already in place at the Students Association, such as committee papers and minutes to be shared with the wider student body. - On how the S L C's work could be communicated to the wider student body, suggestions included increasing the visibility of student representatives within the student body, and also seeking student feedback on their work.	Across the consultation activities there was broad support for the introduction of Scrutiny Panel whose role would be to hold the Student Leadership Team to account, in a constructive way. The principles of the Scrutiny Panel that were most supported in the survey were - ensuring transparency - ensuring effective communications - ensuring effective decision making - ensuring delivery of strategic aims and objectives ensuring delivery of manifesto pledges In terms of methods for the Scrutiny Panel's work, there was support for conducting an annual effectiveness review of the Student Leadership Team, monitoring progress against strategic aims and objectives, appraisals, student feedback and development meetings. (Sections 3.21 to 3.27 in the proposals paper) If the introduction of the Scrutiny Panel is approved by members at conference, the suggestions provided in the consultation for scrutiny principles and methods will be considered as part of the development of the Panel's Terms of Reference and ways of working. The consultations also highlighted the need for the Student Leadership Team to be transparent with, and accountable to, the student body with new approaches to communicating with the wider student body to increase engagement, consistent reporting back, and increasing the visibility of student representatives. Irrespective of whether the new structures are introduced, these changes are now being incorporated in our Communications planning.

You said	Response
4. New Annual General Meeting Format - Content Summary: The key feedback on this thread included questions around student attendees' ability to propose resolutions, having Business items explained in jargon-free language, and whether all students would be able to vote at the A G M. • Feedback on the types of business/discussions that students would like to see raised the question of whether students attending the A G M would have the ability to propose resolutions for debate during the event. • Suggestions included ensuring that all business items are presented in an accessible and jargon-free format that can be easily understood by students new to the Students Association. • On what would encourage students to attend, feedback included enabling all students to vote at the A G M. Together with opening voting to all students, some contributors wished to retain a face-to-face element for the A G M.	In the proposals that have been developed for the new Annual General Meeting (A G M), the content would comprise: • A formal agenda in line with our duties under Company Law and Charity Law, together with the requirements of Student Unions under the Education Act 1994, including an ongoing role in the approval of any changes to our governing document (the Articles of Association) on a minimum basis of at least every four years as at present. • A wider and more detailed programme of activities to engage, consult and involve students. Examples of possible highlights for the programme would include inviting high profile external speakers, OU guest speakers, and non-binding policy debates on key issues affecting OU students that would serve to inform the Student Leadership Team. Policy issues for debate will be able to be submitted by students in advance. We do not propose any move back to a motion-based system as this disengages the vast majority of students. A key change in the proposal is that with the A G M moving to an online format there will be no cap on maximum attendance (as is currently in place for the biennial face-to-face Conference). This would open the A G M to all student members to attend and vote. The ambition is openness to all students – the current Conference voting system runs contrary to this ambition by limiting voting to only those students who are Conference delegates. (Section 4 in the proposals paper)

You said	Response
5. New Annual General Meeting Format – Student Engagement Summary: The feedback on alternative activities/events included suggestions for smaller events paced around the year and at different locations, retaining the face-to-face element.	It was clear from the consultation that whilst there was support for moving to an Annual meeting in an online format, students are keen to retain face-to-face events. There will be cost-savings from the current Conference model which is expensive to operate for the very small number of students who get to attend. From the consultations there was a lot of support for using these cost-savings to invest in alternative ways to increase student engagement and build bigger and stronger student communities by trying to run more local/regional face-to-face events, potentially looking at geographic-based or study discipline-based events to increase engagement opportunities for a larger numbers of students. If the proposal to change from a biennial face-to-face conference to an online A G M is approved by members at conference, the Student Leadership Team will be tasked with taking this work forward and developing proposals for alternative models for face-to-face events. (Section 4 in the proposals paper)

4. Next Steps

The proposals agreed by the Board of Trustees have now been developed into a set of resolutions, with supporting revisions to the Articles of Association, to be presented at Conference in January 2022 for the approval of student delegates. Each resolution for amendment to the Articles requires a quorum of 40% of student delegates to vote on it, together with 75% voting in approval of the resolution in order to pass the resolution.

Five Governance Reform resolutions are being presented to conference delegates:

   i. **Replace the biennial Conference with an Annual General Meeting**

   ii. **Implement the recommended changes to the composition and appointment of the Board of Trustees.**

   iii. **Replace the Central Executive Committee with a new student leadership and representation structure featuring a Student Leadership Team and a Student Forum.**

   iv. **Implement the recommendation of a new Scrutiny Panel to hold the Student Leadership Team to account.**

   v. **Implement a range of minor and consequential changes to the Articles**

You can read a summary of what is in each resolution here.

As these would be significant changes, it is important for students to hear different perspectives on the resolutions. We therefore provided an opportunity in December 2021 for student members to form official 'For' and 'Against' campaigns. Campaigning activity is taking place in the run up to Conference and will include:

- A debate with spokes-persons from each campaign answering questions submitted by students – the debate will be recorded and shared with Conference delegates and the wider student population.

- Social media activity

- Blog posts on our online student magazine, The Hoot.

You can keep up to date with the campaign activity and the conference news on our website and online magazine.

You can also find more information about the Governance Reforms in our video and F A Qs.

10ᵗʰ January 2022